

to exacerbate the problems he has described. Throughout the book, therefore, Hanson attempts to show how the scriptures should arouse the Christian to action, particularly political action, and that narrowly individual or nationalistic perspectives should be replaced by a more universal, global concern for justice.

As regards Hanson's declared aim for the book, it is one that is very important for the United Kingdom as well as for the United States. He is without doubt right that the divide between political liberalism and communitarianism (which we might translate loosely as 'right' and 'left' in our politics) needs to be bridged or transcended. Of course, Hanson's book is unlikely to accomplish this single-handedly. However, at no point does Hanson promise to solve the problems of political government in this one book. He describes the book rather as 'a "trial balloon" sent out into the open skies of public discourse' (viii).

What Hanson does do is bring great resources from his longstanding engagement with biblical texts, and marry these with his deep understanding of the problems and opportunities of the modern world. As such, this short and accessible book should be welcomed by all who are interested in the question of the fundamental relations between faith and politics.

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***God and the Art of Happiness: An Offering of Pastoral Doctrinal Theology*, Ellen T. Charry, Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011, pp. 316, ISBN 978-0802860323. £23.99**

Like its principle subject, Ellen Charry's *God and the Art of Happiness* saves its best rewards for those who are prepared to work. This is a magisterial offering from Charry who builds deep foundations from a historical tour of happiness, before constructing 'asherism' – a

biblically-grounded philosophy of the happy life.

Charry begins her search for happiness in the company of the Epicureans (happiness is the avoidance of pain); the Stoics (happiness is the cultivation of virtuous character); and the neo-Platonists (happiness is in the soul's consciousness of its true nature). We then move to the great Christian architects of happiness. We visit Augustine: happiness is God's therapeutic act of healing the *imago dei*, and largely awaits eternity. We stop by Boethius: happiness must be immune to the capricious visitations of fortune. We then come to Aquinas: happiness might now be found on earth, and in the secondary agency of our own participation in the flourishing of creation. And lastly, we consider Bishop Joseph Butler's argument: that happiness is found in the true pursuit of self-love, 'that God may be happy in our happiness'.

Having thus sketched the contours of historical happiness in the trajectory of post-Augustinian theology, Charry now turns to the scriptures and outlines the concept of 'asherism' as she finds it therein. 'Asherism' is Charry's proposal that, as salvation is a 'realizing eschatology of growth into the beauty and wisdom of God', so therefore 'happiness is enjoying life through a divinely initiated pattern of spiritual growth' (157). She proceeds to trace how this art of happiness is presented in Scripture.

First of all, in the Pentateuch, happiness is presented as the internalising of obedience; and here Charry includes some very helpful analysis of voluntarism in the Pentateuch. Voluntarism is unquestioning obedience to arbitrary commands, and Charry finds that it is a surprisingly infrequent concept in the Pentateuch. Asherism is essentially the opposite of voluntarism: it is obedience to God for the sake of communal flourishing. By contrast, the Pentateuch is rich with asherist injunction. Indeed, Charry identifies the command from Genesis 1, to 'be fruitful and multiply', as the first asherist command (183).

Elsewhere in Scripture, in the Book of Proverbs, happiness is to be found in the mundane and the cautious, the 'glory in the grey' as George MacLeod used to put it. Here happiness is the antithesis of vainglorious adventure and empty excitement.

Meanwhile, Charry's treatment of John's gospel is stirring and

provocative in its Jewish sensibility. She reads John's Jesus as telling 'native citizens that their citizenship is now revoked because the government has passed a new law and they must apply for citizenship in a new country!' (236). In the rancour of this communal dogfight, there emerges an asherist vision of the happy life. By this stage, the bias of Charry's enquiry 'What is happiness?' has morphed into the question 'What is the life that makes us happy?' In John's portrait of rebirth, illumination and divine intimacy, Charry finds the core of asherism – and ironically, this irenic vision is found amongst some of the younger testament's most bitter conflict.

However it is Charry's treatment of the psalms, which forms the fulcrum of her work. Here it is that asherism (from the Hebrew, *ashrey*) is rooted. *Ashrey* is a slippery term: meaning 'happy' or 'blessed', it does not mean a temporary pleasant emotion but a holistic state of being. *Ashrey* is always connected to another object: it is always constructing a positive relationship. Asherism is rooted in reverence for God, and in forms of obedience more general and thoughtful than the specificity of law. It is not mere practice, the doing of 'happy things', but a wise response to the covenant faithfulness of God. In asherism we hear the constant call to remember, to sing, to pray, and to live in this deep form of knowing.

There is much that is wonderful about *God and the Art of Happiness*. Particularly, there is Charry's relentless commitment to a theology that must be enfleshed, and her accompanying belief that life is better lived from the soil of good theology. This practical theology is done with restraint, so that only at the end of the book do we move to application. But throughout the book, every insight is presented as only half-complete – to be utterly true, this truth must be lived. Charry's choice of a philosophy that is rooted in the Psalter is brilliant. Here the psalms are no longer the elaborate frills around meatier doctrine, the warm-up music to the ensuing sermons. Here liturgy is at the heart of living.

In *God and the Art of Happiness* we are in the company of a fearless exegete. Occasionally we slip into the banal (the middle section on Peter's denial), but few others would have the courage to admit that in the Pentateuch, 'Genocide is for the sake of the covenant' (189). It should be clarified that this is not Charry's own position: she

counsels that in such instances, like Abraham, ‘we should confront God.’ Similarly bold is her insistence that we pay attention to Christ’s post-crucifixion descent into hell: ‘he could not stop healing, indeed sought every opportunity to do so’ (258).

There is a similar faithfulness to tradition, in particular to Augustine and Aquinas, for whom the author’s affection is not disguised. This is not the writing of a angry iconoclast, but the reading of a sympathetic though occasionally critical friend. However, it is also here that perhaps this book is at its weakest. In this first section, the digest of ancient contributors on happiness is stamina-sapping, its unrelenting summary is perplexing, and the nuances of development, recapitulation, innovation and refutation are difficult to discern. Charry does warn us of this, and advises that Section 1 is non-compulsory. However, although it is trying, this difficult section sets us up for later enlightenment, so that insights would be lost without it.

Like her beloved Augustine, Charry climaxes with love. She describes a Jesus who travelled round Galilee ‘making trouble in order to make love’. It is in this life of divine love that Asher is found, uniting both us and God in the creative art of happiness.

Finally, we learn that Charry wrote this book from a moment in life of profound loss and bereavement. This reviewer read her words when also in the disorienting shock of grief. For him, as well as for Charry, the ‘comfort and enjoyment of a reverent life is a tool for fighting tragedy and rebounding from it.’ (228). Asherism is a vital offering: inspired wisdom for a happy life.

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